

The Thien Ly Flower

Duyên Anh



My mama loved the *thien ly* flower the way she loved my family. How deep and lovely were the soft green of its leaves and the gentle fragrance of the blossom that she should hold it so dear!

Usually she planted it in bunches. She erected an arched arbor. Every afternoon she brought water to freshen the roots and help the flowers grow. The leaves traced the rising branches and covered the frame and the cicadas chirruped in the summer, and the praying mantis family crept up the arbor of bright colored flowers all through the day.

As for myself, as a child perhaps I was more interested in the guava tree hanging heavy with ripe fruit than in my mama's *thien ly*. But each time Mama and I went to the garden with our baskets to pick clumps of flowers to take home and cook in soup with the rice field crabs, my heart was light and cheery and my mama, too, took delight in being by her arbor.

- These flowers cooked with little crabs taste just wonderful, son!
- How can that be when they smell like that, Mama ? I hate your flowers! What kind of plant doesn't have fruit ? Tomorrow I'm going to cut it down!
- You spoiled thing! You just don't know how to eat them, so don't talk about how it should be. Today you try it and see. It's kind of sweet.
- Sweet like candy, Mama ?

Mama laughed and fixed her eyes on me. Her gentle eyes were like a timeless, indefinable lullaby. Even today, while I cannot recall all the glorious memories of my childhood, still I tell myself that those memories were all recorded in the sound of the lullabies Mama used to sing me as I lay in her tiny arms and imprinted in the light her eyes used to send me then - sensations that have settled in my soul.

- Your mama loves the *thien ly* the way she loves you kids. Whenever you hate my flowers, I get very angry!
- Oh! Oh! Then I love the *thien ly*, too!

I said this quickly so she would not get mad. Mama only laughed. And from that day, every day around noontime Mama took me outside to the flowers. She spread a mat out on the ground and there she sat thinking faraway thoughts. I would lie with my head pillowed in her lap dreamily listening to the whistling of the kites, the creaking of the hammock, a warm lullaby or the cooing of pigeons somewhere. Sometimes Mama told me about things I did not understand, but surely her heart was always light because I always saw her with a vague smile on her lips. Usually I fell asleep in that peaceful air.

I learned to like planting the flowers. I made Mama build me an arbor frame. She told me that when summer came the following year my flowers would be very beautiful, all four seasons the white blossoms shining in the moonlight. But I had no chance to wait for the summer to come. As the plants were beginning to creep up the frame, Papa came back from Hanoi and he took us all up to Vinh Yen to open a plantation. As I left my mama's village, I did not miss the kite whistles, but only had memories of the newly planted *thien ly* arbor.

I grew up, then, amid the vast and grand spectacle of the mountains. The afternoons I went horseback riding with Papa were not as enjoyable to me as lying on the grassy banks listening to the creek slip by. I hated the faces of my papa's foremen. I detested their shouts as they reproached the workers. I even despised the cold, horrible face of my papa. To this day, I do not know why as a small boy I took such a liking to things soft and quietly pleasant, like the drops of sweat running down the back of a tradesman or my mama's steady breaths. Mine was a simple soul, so I took no interest in the rough trees growing all over the wild and thick jungle. I still liked the *thien ly* arbor in my mama's village.

Mama tried to bring the flower to our mountain home, but after a little while she had nothing to show for all her labor. Was it because the flower was not suited to the jungle soil or because the jungle refused vegetation that depended on human effort to grow? Each time someone went back to the plains Mama asked him to bring up a strain of flowers to see how it would grow. But Papa always brushed this request aside.

- What's the use of planting that damn thing? he said.

- You never want to have something nice to remember the past, Mama responded.

Every time this happened Mama became very sad and sometimes she cried and would not eat for two or three days. Since I was barely ten years old at the time, how could I comprehend my mama's feelings or try to understand how she cherished that flower? But anyway, she went on planting and eventually she was satisfied. A handful of blue blossoms shone pretty and proud as a princess standing before her subjects. Summers came and summers went. There were no field crabs in the jungle, so the *thien ly* had to be cooked with finely ground boar meat. Yet, how wonderful it tasted! my mama said.

- It has the fragrance of home, son! she declared.

Summer afternoons in that region had no kite whistles or sad and deep lullabies. Mama no longer spread out a mat beneath the arbor or sat telling me stories until I fell asleep. Life in the mountains trailed on from one stale page to the next. The jungle rains with their dull moon only made me feel angry and frustrated as I watched from a house set on tall piles. And the evening sunlight dropping on the trees and leaves, altering the color of everything around - this, too, gave me no thrill. I already knew what it meant to love one's native home.

But before long the plantation work failed. The ruthless sun withered the tea and coffee trees and they died. Papa had to give it all up and he brought us back to Hanoi.

After that, my papa changed completely. He found any excuse to yell at Mama, though she was always gentle and kind. Oftentimes Papa went out for days at a time. Mama just sat and cried then, and to help pass the time as she waited for Papa to come home repentant, she tried to find happiness in planting *thien ly* on a vine up the wall. But there was one night she cried so hard that the next morning her eyes were swollen. Papa had abandoned his wife and children to follow the call of the wild. Once a bird has taken to wing, who knows when it will return to the nest? Mama suddenly thought of the horizon, her village, silent like the flow of the Tra Ly River at the close of autumn. She took my brother and me back there to resume the peaceful days of the past.

I lived a carefree life with my mama's family, all day flying my kite or going fishing. Mama taught my younger brother and me. I grew up slowly under the thoughtful care and dreamy composure of my mama. My soul was imbued with the flowers of the pomelo, jasmine and *thien ly*. I wanted only to live forever on the plot of land in my home village, sharing a simple life where the folk loved one another sincerely like the love for the land and the rice you grew. That was all there was to my dream, but though I weaved it on, why did it never come to be or was I merely deceiving myself to chase after the wind and the waves of the ocean?

During this time my mama often sighed. Every afternoon she stood beside the *thien ly* arbor out in the alley, watching the clouds go by. It was then she experienced the most sacred moments of her life.

Our lives started to become difficult then. Papa had still not returned. Mama counted the days a year and a half he was gone. The pomelo flowers fell at the end of the garden, then dried and withered. Poor people have no time for frivolous thoughts, so Mama stopped picking the flowers and stringing them to place around my neck. I continued going out to the family fields with her to glean the fallen rice after her sickle had lightly cut each clump of rice stalks. No one wanted to complain. As life ever blossomed intense, how could my heart not open up to let hope rush in? Mama worked hard all day, but she still set aside some of her precious time to teach my little brother to spell beneath the *thien ly* arbor in the early afternoon and make me memorize short poems.

After lessons, I often asked, "Mama, where did Papa go?"

- Far away...far away.

She answered thus and tears welled in her eyes until she could hold them in no longer, then she hugged me and my brother and wept. I felt so bad for her that I burst into sobs, too, while she tried to comfort me.

- He'll be back next year, she said. Hush! We can cry again tomorrow. Anymore and you'll hurt your eyes.

Mama's village was very poor and though we lived with my grandmother, Mama spent many months working hard out of doors. My little brother and I were deprived of much.

When the *thien ly* grew full on the vine, Mama had to pick and trade some of its flowers for crabs to make soup or sell them for a few cents to buy her children a puff cake or some sesame candy. One morning I saw her climbing the fig tree by the pond off the path, picking some sour green bunches of figs to make a delicious salt. Suddenly that noon she came down with a stomach pain. Grandma had to borrow some tiger balm and heat bricks from the stove to apply to Mama's stomach before

she got better. Mama tried hard to hide the story. Later, when I was older and we were a little better off, Mama told me about it

- I was starving. I thought I could eat a few figs. Who would have thought it would be so terrible ? I've been afraid to eat them ever since!

I still recall that bitter memory. Sometimes, reflecting back on the past I cannot help but have strong feelings.

Two years later Papa returned. The bird's wings had grown weary and he had to fly back to the old nest to rebuild all that had been lost yesterday. As my parents met, Mama cried like she had the day Papa left us. Happy or sad, a woman uses only tears to express her emotions.

On coming home, my papa brought with him a rather serious eye ailment and a machete. Day and night, Mama looked after Papa's eyes.

Because of her care, in a few short months, Papa recovered. From then on he never left us.

Papa often told me stories about the jungle. Whenever he found it convenient, he would take out his big knife proudly. Great! A Tho (1) friend gave it to me. With that precious knife, Papa had dug holes for the planting of trees.

Once I saw Papa and Mama talking together for a long time by the *thien ly*. Since that time, the flowers cooked with little crabs in a soup never tasted sweeter.

The current of time flowed quietly, but life no longer ran peacefully like the Tra Ly River at autumn's close. I was older than before and had to witness the storms and vicious waves that fell upon our tranquil home. We returned to Papa's village, leaving with my mama's family each boundless piece of sunshine of the lovely and dear afternoons of the past. Mama again built an arbor, planted *thien ly* and sat telling my brother and me about her village. My brother would fall asleep as I once had in that peaceful air. Sinking in the eternal silence of the countryside, Mama's voice ardently flowing into my ear took the place of the restful lullabies and made my heart grow wider every day and my eyes were deeply colored the color of dreams. My soul so full of feelings, anything could steal my heart away from a crude brown shirt to a brown rag soiled with mud, from a wobbly bridge over a pond to a rough thatch hut. I began to contemplate the fate of golden leaves dying and falling when the autumn came and of moorhens calling in the sultry months. And if today someone should ask why I cling to the sound of the lute and the funeral pipes and to the soft brown shirt bound by a green belt- why do I cling to all the old images that have been sorrowfully buried in the bowels of the earth of my home village, how shall I answer him ?

The cord of love is like a fine thread that binds you tightly, binds you and takes the heart in such a way that no one can tell from what moment the cord was fastened. Love knows no meaning or explanation, like a flower has its bouquet, incense its fragrance, the moon its light and the stars their twinkle. Nonetheless, I would venture to say it was at the *thien ly* arbor that my mama taught me my first lesson in human love.

When I reached 16, I found myself moving farther and farther away from Mama. A fledgling that can leave the nest will one day fly away while its mother leans her head on a tiny wing, thinking forlornly of places far away and of the storms that attend them. Mama seemed to understand that, and so one afternoon in the second month when the kapok flowers were falling crimson on the village road, she led me to remote places and narrow alleys, across bridges of bamboo and stone. She pointed out to me gaunt and tattered tufts of bamboo and slanted earthen walls. We halted beside a tiny spring, gazing silently at the curved roof of the village house, the lanky

buffalo, and the green fields and she talked about them a little. In the end she took me to the top of the village to eat puff cake soup with fish, then we came home and sat under the *thien ly*. She began speaking with words of hidden sorrow.

- I wonder where else the *thien ly* grows. Hmm, the flower is so plain and the smell is lost in a moment, though it seems to last forever.

At that time, the echo of kite whistles rose high and wide. The sunlight was mild and tinted the landscape. From far off came the cry of a calf that had strayed from its mother, the sound of time settling down. I remained still, not daring to break the silence, paying no heed to my concerns suspended on fine threads. Mama sat quietly, a strange sad light in her eyes. The meek and gentle glow that I remembered from my childhood was still there in the endless streams of her eyes. Why did I not see it then, but felt only an unhappy love that stole my heart ? Yes, I had grown up. Yesterday or the day before Mama had taught me to write poetry. She did not tell me that love needs to have a dark sadness before it can become beautiful. At least I, too, tried to be a poet So no one should think strange my images of Mama's eyes.

As evening fell quickly, I called to her softly. She was startled and looked at me lovingly.

- Long, I want to tell you about the *thien ly*. I have waited until today when you were old enough that you might leave home at any time like your father did when you were a boy. I took you to my home then. Now you will understand why. Listen to me, Long!

Slowly and deliberately she went on to relate certain pages from the past written more than ten years before, beginning with the words "long ago". Yes, long ago, when my mama's soul was still cheery, her black eyes had not yet been stained with the dust of life, her young hair had not been shaken, all the villagers declared that she was pretty but no one dared love her or hold dear that feeble soul except her mother. Oh, it was not strange, for mama had TB, a most dreaded contagious disease. When her young eyes were hazy with dreams, that was when she wept much, alone and hurt The noise of wedding firecrackers tore at her heart Red and blue silk dresses turned into mourning clothes as if to shroud the life of a girl who had not yet seen twenty springs. Amorous butterflies refused to stop at the poison garden and consequently Mama declined, nearly drifting away from this world. She became downcast and bitter. Every evening she stood beneath the *thien ly* arbor by the alley, watching the clouds change color and waiting for the day she would sleep peacefully in her grave.

Then one day there came a ferryboat carrying a banished soul to the landing at Thanh Trieu. That man of world-sized dreams stopped at the flower arbor, realizing at last that the distant road only went on and on without end. That banished soul was Papa. He proposed marriage to mama. She wept and refused, explaining to him about her illness. He did not need to think. He was determined to marry her, no matter how painful the result Mama was so moved that she fainted in his arms. Then Papa saw to her treatment and Mama's heart burst into a flame of love and trust She recovered with the medicines, but more because of Papa's love.

She paused in her story and smiled.

- Do you believe it ? she asked me.

Believe what ?

That people can live by love and die stifled if they have not enjoyed love in all the world, like your mama ?

- Yes, Mama!

She went on. For a while, Papa gave up his dreams of adventure, stopping at Mama's village to pour into her ears melodies gay and sad, to pour into her soul the most comforting and caressing forms of that love which knows no bounds. Papa taught her all the most ardent feelings, handing on to her the full spiritual inheritance of those people of the land who can love each other, feelings that now, mingled with Mama's dreams, she has passed on to her sons. These memories were roused from the *thien ly* arbor of Mama's home village and that is why she liked to plant the gentle flower wherever she went in the jungle hills, in the countryside, in the city.

- Do you see, son ?

- Is that all, Mama ?

- Hmm.

- Why is it so short ? I thought it would be a long story.

- When could I ever tell it all ? Try to look further. I only told you a little bit.

Someday you will leave and one evening you will meet a girl beneath a bower of *thien ly*. Who can tell the whole story of love? Who knows it all that can tell it ?

So hard, Mama!

Oh, how so ? Someday when you're off someplace far away, you will ride a boat on New Year's Eve to a familiar landing. Then you will find yourself with no place to return and that's when you will understand love. When your heart is aching, when you're lost and unsure, when you feel there's something missing but you don't know how to describe it - then you will understand love. Or when you feel a fellow man suffering, or with tears in your eyes you bend to kiss the forehead of an orphan or lead a fellow worker by the hand down the road- then you will understand love. And more, more, love is extremely complicated and difficult to fathom. You will see, my little son!

- Suppose I don't understand ?

- Nonsense! You must understand, you must say it with your heart, by your tears, drawing the pages of serious poetry that I taught you the rules for. But, my oldest son, when you pack your things, then let me know. I won't stop you. The leader of the flock must go out and see the way for others. I'll give you this piece of advice...Well, go inside.

What was it she had wanted to say ? And why did she suddenly think of the day I would leave home ? That night I was troubled, thinking. The scent of the *thien ly* enveloped my feelings, stirring like the time I saw a bird that had strayed from the flock flying out to a distant land. The days and months tumbled by one after the other. Mama still planted the *thien ly* and in the middle hours of summer days field crabs cooked with the flowers were ever delicious. It was when I turned twenty that my mama's prediction came true. Oh, God! I lied to my mama. When I left the bandits from the mountains (2) came down in hordes, because I went so far away. The night I took my leave, I stood outside on the porch listening. My heart beat fast, my tears flowed. Trembling, I knocked on the door. Mama came out I wiped my tears quickly, saying, Has Due come back yet, Mama ? I brought him in a little while ago.

- Really ? He's asleep now.

- Mama...tomorrow... I'm going...

- Where ? Do you feel the need to travel ?

- I'm going to the training (3) for two days.

- Ah, I thought...Take a blanket so you don't get cold. Do you need any money ? I'll give you some.

- No, Mama! It's late. Why don't you go back inside ? I'm leaving tonight

Mama went back in the house, dragging her wooden shoes on the floor. I thought I heard the sound of two hearts breaking. There was a sigh and a heavy thud as she lay down on the bed.

I stood there without moving. What sacred force rooted me to that spot ? I wanted to run, but it was so hard, like trying to run from something terrible in a dream. When I woke out of it, I pushed myself on, taking nothing with me, with no word of farewell, with no one to see me off.

I spent three or four years roaming in the South, and each time the winds of autumn blew past, my heart stirred in sadness. My life carried on from day to day, drifting from one place to the next, everywhere woven together by gloom and ennui. My eyes were green, my head covered with the dust of life. I went on, wondering to myself why people had to think, to set limits, instead of opening wide the doors of their hearts to meet from all directions ardent gusts of love or give voice to their thoughts everywhere so that others might believe in life. I wanted to cast out such words as "doubt" and "indecision", so much that once I followed my leader and went to make revolution in the jungle. But oh...! I cried for many nights to bear my broken body back to the city after being beaten in half my dreams. My heart daily thirsted for more love. I learned its sacred and seductive power and I thought much of my mama....

Now the *thien ly* arbor in my home withers away. The cicadas do not welcome in the summer and the praying mantises have died of grief.

There in the North, people are forbidden to be unhappy or to miss someone or to love one another. So how could my mama sit beneath the flowers to talk to my little brother ? How could she have a moment to lie down and imagine a storm outside and see a small bird wandering from its flock, drifting, battered and worn ?

I am dejected and want to cry when I think that one evening they (4) forced Mama to pull up her flowers and destroy the bamboo frame to plant corn or sweet potatoes. Mama would then die withered and dried on the battered earth full of resentment I do not know if she feels angry with me or sorry for not having given me her last words of advice For myself I regret the dreams that were defeated in the jungle. Perhaps her bit of advice would have had some relation to that

I go and seek love in the color of the *thien ly* flowers, searching for mothers who would speak of the heart, looking for a girl who casts her eyes dreamily out beneath the arbor. I have not yet met anyone at all. My love for humanity is still strong inside. But the sunlight in the South is warm, and whatever you plant in the Southern soil will give fruit. So I tend the tree of Hope and forget that I am living in misery and sorrow, lacking everything from the warmth of a family to a fine shirt I will go on, and seek the questioning light in the eyes of my people to nurture the tree of Hope so that the flower of human love will blossom full and cover the sky.

When a forest of trees of love are filled with fruit the people of my home will return to steal back their land and I must meet the girl beneath the arbor who sits counting the drops of sunset falling on the waves of her hair. Upon my return, we will marry. I will take her back to my mama's village and show her the traces of the *thien ly* bower of the past. She and I will build a frame and plant flowers and every afternoon water the roots so they will grow. And when the leaves have followed the branches to cover the arbor, the cicadas will chirrup the summer through and the praying mantis family will climb up and down all day in the green of a thousand years. I will sit beneath the bower telling the story called "The Tale of Mama's *Thien Ly* Flowers" to my love She will have to remember it and relate it to our children someday. The village of long ago will make beautiful the color of brown shirts, and

more lively the sound of saws cutting wood to build a village hall. I will sing songs comparing words of love with the blue of the ly flower, gentle, soft, suspended from a thousand years in the past to a thousand years in the future.

Translated from the story *HOA THIÊN LÝ*.

- 1.- A mountain tribe in North Vietnam.
- 2.- Bands of mountain thieves lived in the remote areas of the country.
- 3.- This refers to training organized by the revolutionary army, which recruited young men for its forces.
- 4.- This refers to the Communists, whose fanatic ideology rejects sentiment and beauty while replacing them with dull utilitarian practices.